MANAGING STUDENT TRAFFIC DURING PEAK PERIODS

by Carol Raphael and Linda Milks

Few experiences are as trying for financial aid offices as the peak periods of the student traffic at the beginning of each term. How well the financial aid office deals with these hectic days often sets the tone for the entire year. Indeed, the management of peak periods may have a lasting impact, positive or negative, on the morale of the office staff, as well as on the attitude of the rest of the university community toward the financial aid office. Despite their importance, many offices muddle through peak periods without a clear plan of operations tailored to meet the exigencies of the moment. This paper offers some suggestions to help financial aid offices develop a rational system for coping with high traffic periods. Although written with the large office in mind, many of the following ideas can be incorporated into operations of any size.

Planning

Creating a system to handle peak traffic periods involves three related components: planning, resource management, and evaluation. Successful systems begin with proper planning. In many offices, where the whole work day is already committed to the unending business of processing aid applications, long-range planning is often viewed as a frivolous luxury or postponed until that elusive day when the desk tops are finally clear of work. Consequently, a self-perpetuating cycle unfolds. Heavy work loads do not afford the time needed to install a peak period plan, and the absence of a plan precludes the possibility of overtaking the backlog of work. However difficult it may seem to break that cycle and make advanced preparations for high traffic periods, such planning will result in better management practices and saved time in the long run.

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The development of a model to manage student traffic during peak periods represents the collaborative endeavors of the financial aid staff at the University of Michigan. Special thanks goes to Lynn Borset for her contributions.

The starting point for developing a plan for peak periods depends on the efficacy of the office's current operation. If a system is already in place and merely needs fine tuning, preparations can be completed in one or two meetings of the appropriate staff members or planning committee. For less fortunate offices, a one or two-day planning seminar, scheduled once or twice a year and held away from the office, is one way to tackle the problem. The agenda of the seminar can be structured around discussion papers to provide a review of the pros and cons of a new system or other critical issues. A planning calendar can be started to keep track of important dates, such as student notification and publication deadlines, conferences, and commitments to internal processing. Brainstorming to improve a weak area of the office is another fruitful undertaking of the planning seminar.

Whatever type of session is used, several factors must be weighed when devising a strategy to manage student traffic. First, the plan must conform to the goals and objectives of the office. What has to be accomplished during the peak period? The answer to this question rests, in part, on the office's philosophy of student contact, which will define the services that the office is willing to provide. The staff should know the office philosphy and use it as a benchmark to calculate the ability of a peak period plan to address student needs. Second, the anticipated volume and nature of student visitors, estimated on an hourly or daily basis, will determine the facilities required of the peak period plan, including perhaps the need to set up temporary stations to house certain services in high demand or the need to reserve rooms for large meetings.

Having studied office philosophy, administrative necessities, and the estimated traffic volume, the planning committee can then list the services that will have to be provided during the registration period. Typically, these include notarizing forms, receiving acceptance declinations, checking in Guaranteed Student Loan applications, conducting interviews with first-time borrowers, and handling general referrals to other offices.

At this point, specific measures to provide these services can be detailed. Handling students during peak periods may require some modification of what are considered normal operating procedures. If, why, and how the system should be temporarily changed are issues that warrant attention. Since the main goal during a high traffic period is to accommodate student needs as efficiently as possible, it may be necessary to establish certain priorities. If, for example, it is essential to have fully completed entries on Guaranteed Student Loan applications to prevent the lender from returning them, then the staff should know what is required and receive the training to do the job properly. Similarly, if the financial aid office cannot handle students with prior-term indebtedness, a standard response to these cases should be developed beforehand and used consistently throughout the peak period. Finally, provisions should be made for coping with unusual situations, such as disruptions by angry or recalcitrant students.

The final element of a peak period plan is turning it into action. Within the office, task schedules must be arranged to ensure that each responsibility is covered during registration week. Jobs and assignments can be organized by making a chart, such as the one shown below.

TASKS	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI
File finding	Bob	Sue	Bob	Sue	Connie
Notarizing	Kathy	Bill	Kathy	Bill	Kathy
GSL intake	Jill	Judy	Jan	Joe	Jill
Disbursement interviews	Jim	John	Ron	Sally	Sharon
Reception	Tom	Jane	Tom	James	Tom
Line monitoring	Pete	Ann	Lynn	Mike	Henry

The peak period plan and its operation must then be explained to both students and staff. Students can be reached by using various media, such as financial aid brochures, the campus newspaper (including paid advertisements), radio announcements, videotapes, an office newsletter, and bulletin board posters. Although the office personnel should have access to the materials aimed at students, an official registration memorandum that clarifies all critical issues, outlines work schedules, and includes samples of any new forms, should also be circulated to provide the staff with consistent and complete information.

Managing Resouces

The successful implementation of any plan for peak traffic periods depends on the effective mobilization of office resources to meet the demands of the situation. Generally speaking, whether a large or small office, these resources can be identified as *space, equipment and supplies, information,* and *staff.* Let us briefly examine the use of each of these during peak periods.

Space. Adequate space is crucial for the smooth flow of student traffic and for staff operations during times of heavy traffic. Offices that were designed to handle ten students per hour, for example, likely will prove inadequate during rush periods when the volume of students swells to fifty per hour. Consequently, to determine whether or not existing space is being employed with maximum effectiveness, a survey should be taken of the office layout before the peak period begins, with an eye to the following questions.

Does the office have separate entrances and exits for student traffic? If not, can temporary exit routes be charted through seldom-used back doors or rear offices? As a rule, any plan that can keep student traffic flowing in a single direction will reduce chaos and possible tension in the reception area, while also allowing the office to accommodate the greatest number of students possible.

Are there clear paths with easy access from the financial office to other offices, such as admissions, accounting, and the registrar, that students might frequent during a registration period? To minimize confusion and the possibility of students standing in the wrong line, the financial aid office should set up well-defined and clearly marked access avenues to other offices where students are commonly directed.

Is there so much furniture in the reception area of the financial aid office that it becomes difficult to accommodate large numbers of people? Furniture in public areas should be reduced to a bare minimum during peak periods. Large, bulky desks and chairs that take up space needed for students, or for equipment vital to processing applications, should be pushed aside or moved out of the area for the duration of the period.

Should the office maintain an information counter or its equivalent during high traffic periods? By registration time, most students no longer need general

financial aid information, literature, or application forms. Consequently, in many cases, the information desk in the student reception area is underused or perhaps even inaccessable to walk-in visitors because of the long lines of students with specific questions or problems. Consider eliminating the information desk during peak periods, or moving it to a location away from the mainstream of traffic.

In addition to using existing space with maximum effectiveness, the financial aid office might also find it necessary to procure additional room during peak periods. There are several ways in which temporary expansion can be facilitated. For example, wide hallways or lobbies outside the office doors may be used as stations where forms can be collected, applications disseminated, counseling appointments made, or notary services provided. Another solution is to set up stations in the lobby areas at the front of the building that houses the financial aid office, or even in other buildings on campus. If this latter idea is tried, there are several potential problems to bear in mind. Placing financial aid stations or temporary offices in locations removed from the main office will work only if the operation is tightly coordinated. Students must be informed by advertising the existence of these stations and the services that can be received there. For example, if certain problems can be handled only at the main office, it is crucial that prior advertising makes this clear to the student population to avoid misundertandings.

A final way to temporarily expand office space during peak periods is to position members of the financial aid staff in other campus offices, such as those of the registrar or the bursar, that deal with numerous problems related to financial aid operations. In this way, instant advice is available to students without them having to join the long lines at the financial aid office.

The central idea behind all of these contingency plans it to divert a large amount of student traffic away from the central office in order to minimize congestion and to prevent the processing system from becoming overloaded. Students who do not have a complicated problem or do not need a highly specialized service should be steered away from the main office whenever possible. Quick and easy business matters can be transacted outside the main doors, allowing inside only those students with involved, time-consuming questions.

Equipment and supplies. To weather peak periods, it is important to have sufficient quantities of supplies in stock and to use available office equipment with full effectiveness. An inventory control system will assure that necessary items, such as application forms and financial statements, are on hand throughout the registration period. If the office does not already have such a system, it should develop one during the aforementioned planning phase of the operation. Specific responsibility for each supply item should be assigned to staff members. If necessary, professional assistance may be sought from within or outside the university to develop a dependable inventory control apparatus. In addition, a survey should be taken of all office equipment to determine how each piece can best be employed during registration week to hasten the work flow. When ordering new equipment, it should be kept in mind that managing peak periods will require some improvisation. It will be helpful to purchase portable equipment that can be shifted around and moved to meet the requirements of the high traffic plan.

Information. Gathering and disseminating information are central to any financial aid operation. Incoming data on aid applicants must be well organized and readily available when it is needed for processing or for fielding student inquiries. Outgoing information, such as notices of deadlines or procedures, must be carefully chosen so that it will not overwhelm people with unnecessary data or confusing details; once selected, this information then has to be communicated in a clear, concise, and direct manner.

These concepts, however basic, are especially important to remember during peak periods, when the volume of traffic does not afford the time to track down misplaced files or to go back and re-explain unclear directions to befuddled students. There are several instruments for organizing or transmitting information, in particular, that merit discussion because of their potential impact on the office's performance during rush periods.

Student files are a good place to begin, since they are the information system most frequently used within the office, and because the time lost searching for files probably represents the greatest drain on office resources during peak periods. To prepare for the registration rush, the office should institute—or revitalize—procedures to make student files accessible with reasonable speed and efficiency. If necessary, a cleanup campaign can be conducted before the peak period. All files not receiving immediate attention should be taken from staff desks and work areas and returned to the main storage location. The time spent on the filing system before the peak period will pay off in terms of time saved and frustrations spared during the crunch.

During the actual rush period, however, an even better suggestion is to pull student files only as a last resort. In many offices, file storage bins are far removed from the student reception area, and having staff members run back and forth to the files will only slow down operations. In addition, pulling innumerable files during the hectic registration period will certainly increase the chance of disrupting processing in progress or of misplacing files.

For schools with some sort of data processing capacity, computer printouts and microfiche are attractive alternatives to combing through files for information. Having access to data in the form of printouts and microfiche can cut office operating expenses by shrinking the time spent gathering information, and can reduce staff and student stress by providing faster answers to inquiries. A key to the successful employment of printouts and microfiche is staff training. The staff must be fully educated about the range of data that can be obtained on printouts and microfiche, and they must be made to feel comfortable—through practice — when perusing information in these formats. It is also important that the office obtains its data sheets from the university processing center at the right moment. When requesting a data run, sufficient time should be allowed to get the information back in hand for the registration period. But if the printouts are ordered too far in advance and the most recent updates are not included, some of the data will be erroneous or useless.

Since offices customarily send out their financial aid announcements and materials well before the registration period, the need to fully educate large numbers of students about the financial aid process or to transmit unfamiliar items of complicated information to students should not be a serious concern during the

peak period itself. It is, however, worth briefly commenting on several modes of disseminating information to students, methods that can help expedite business at the office and reduce confusion during the rush.

Two devices that can be employed profitably during peak periods are "status inquiry" forms and student passes. Most schools will inform students that their financial aid applications are complete or have been processed at some point prior to the new term. Consequently, when a student appears at the office during registration asking what happened to his or her application, it may take considerable time to track down the file and discover the nature of the problem. Researching each inquiry of this nature on the spot not only puts a burden on staff resources, but also holds up the line for other students. The status inquiry form can help alleviate this situation. A short, one-page form can be designed to provide the office with the information needed to hasten the investigation. For example, if the office must await admissions decisions to begin reviewing aid applications, some notation of the student's status as "new" or "continuing" would be an important item to include.

Once designed, the status inquiry form can be used during rush periods to minimize office crowding and student waiting time. Students who are at the office only to find out the disposition of their applications can be asked to fill out the status inquiry form, and a system can be instituted to provide the student with an answer by a certain date. Specific staff members should be assigned the responsibility of investigating these inquiries, and answers may be provided either by mail or by having the students call the office (preferably on a line specifically advertising for this purpose) after the promised date.

Student passes are another way to keep lines moving and to reduce tensions during the rush period. In cases where there is some confusion between the financial aid office and another university operation, such as the accounting or the cashier's offices, students often find themselves traveling from one line to another and then back again. Or else, the administrator has to make calls around the university to solve the problem while the student waits. A solution for these situations is to issue the student a pass, preferably color-coded for easy identification, that is recognized by university offices. These passes allow students to go to designated points in an office for assistance without having to wait through another long queue. At the same time, by having the student act as a mediary on his own behalf between the two offices, the financial aid staff saves its time and energy.

The pass system is also recommended in cases where the financial aid office has a special line—such as one for payment problems only—and wants to make sure that only the appropriate students enter that line. By screening students as they enter the premises and issuing passes for the special line, the frustration normally generated when people wait long periods in the wrong line can be avoided. And when all else fails, and students still stand in the wrong line or visit the the wrong office, a pass system can be implemented to allow them to go to the right place and receive immediate attention without having to spend long hours in yet another line.

A final method of conveying information on the spot to minimize confusion among students during rush periods is the use of signs or other visual aids around

the office. Professionally designed and prepared signs that are strategically placed at highly visible locations can serve a number of functions, ranging from answering commonly asked questions, such as those about deadline dates, to directing the traffic flow. To make the strongest possible impression, signs should be simple and to the point. Different types of information should be put on different signs. And at all times, the information must be up to date, even if this means preparing a new batch of signs each semester.

Staff. A well-constructed plan for peak traffic periods will only reach fruition with the cooperation of the staff. Indeed, staff members are the single most important element in making any operation a success, and the keys to effective use of staff are proper motivation and a clear division of tasks.

In assigning tasks, office responsibilities must first be defined. Typical jobs during peak periods include phone reception, file running, notary service, GSL review and check in, disbursement interviewing, and assisting in College Work-Study selection. One especially good use of staff is to have someone monitor student lines at the office, so that students who are submitting forms or seeking general information can be assisted quickly.

Motivating and preparing staff is critical to a smooth operation. How confident staff members feel during peak periods will depend on advance preparation. This can take many forms, depending on the expertise and experience of the staff member. For new administrators, complete training may be necessary. For veterans, ongoing or refresher training should be adequate. Learning to read microfiche, for example, would be a valuable exercise for staff members who are not normally required to use it in their daily activities but have to do so during the peak period.

In addition to training, staging a kickoff meeting, providing staff organization time, and offering some kind of end reward are ways to better office performance during peak periods. The kickoff meeting can be likened to a pep rally. Led by the office director, the meeting serves as a forum to stress to the entire staff the virtues of doing a good job, the merits of supporting one another, and the value placed on team effort by those in leadership positions. Staff organization time will further enhance the prospects for a successful registration week. If possible, the office should be closed for half a day to allow employees to act on any unfinished files and return them to their storage areas. At the same time, last-minute directions can be communicated and special changes made in the physical arrangement of the office. The half-day respite will also help the staff to mentally prepare for the busy period ahead. Finally, the promise of a reward—such as an office party—at the end of the registration period will not only bolster morale, but also will serve to express appreciation for a job well done.

Evaluation

The final component in the management of peak periods is an evaluation of how well the system worked. Shortly after the traffic winds down, the planning committee should meet and log a record of the successes and failures of the plan in action. A formal document can then be written for future reference to improve the system the next time around.

Since high traffic periods almost always correspond to term registration or application deadlines, the upcoming period can easily be noted on the yearly plan-

ning calendar. And as the planning committee completes its evaluation of the last peak period operation, meetings can be scheduled and preparations begun for the next one.

Conclusion

While there is no panacea that will eliminate all the problems inherent in peak periods, there is no reason to struggle through the busy seasons with the dread of certain chaos, administrative crisis, and student dissatisfaction that many financial aid offices generate. Proficient management of peak traffic periods rests on two pillars: a well-organized plan and its successful execution, using all office resources with maximum effectiveness. The whole thing initially may seem a laborious task, but it is an investment that will pay off in the long run. With a little luck, maybe your students will even leave the financial aid office with slight smiles on their faces. At least *you* should be able to start smiling!